

Agency collaboration in McLean County results in a model integration effort

By Cristin Monti

After eight years of collaborative planning, development, and implementation, McLean County's mission to create an integrated justice information system is nearly complete. The state's attorney, public defender, circuit court, sheriff, probation department, and various local law enforcement agencies will share data ownership in 2001.

Elected officials and appointed leaders of the agencies formed an integrated justice committee that met weekly in the planning stages of the integration process, which was born out of a private consultant's study revealing numerous office inefficiencies. Data entry was consuming more time than ever in the growing county, the study showed.

"We knew we had to change the way we do business or expect every year from now to add people just to keep up with the workload," said County Administrator John Zeunik.

McLean is geographically the largest county in Illinois, and it has a population of about 140,000. The county's criminal justice system began experiencing the pressures of an increasing workload in the early 1990s. A surge was seen throughout the decade in the number of cases filed by the State's Attorney's Office, assignments to the Public Defender's Office, and adult and juvenile detention facility populations.

Increased paperwork and data entry coincided with the growing caseloads. It also was determined that 64 cents of every county tax dollar were being spent on its justice system.

It became evident that a more advanced automated system was necessary to handle several tasks that were manually performed. The system they were using required a large amount of repeated data entry. Each department compiled its own case data, causing the same information to be entered four or five times throughout the county. This contributed to a backlog of data entry, and ultimately the need for additional staff. In addition, it created more instances in which data could be entered incorrectly.

"When we first started meeting, we knew two things — we weren't efficient and we were expensive," said Circuit Clerk Sandra Parker.



Researching a system

The committee wanted a system that could provide basic case information in a seamless manner to each entity of the county's criminal justice system while curbing the need to enter data that already had been captured by another office. Committee members set out to create a system that would enable each department to work more efficiently while allowing faster, broader access to more accurate information. But after conferring with justice information system experts at the National Center for State Courts in Williamsburg, Va., they learned such a product did not yet exist.

"There was no third party, shrink-wrapped product we could buy," Zeunik said. "We were basically charting new ground. There was no roadmap to tell us how to do this."

They researched vendors that had the ability to develop an integrated justice system. While TRW Systems and Information Technology Group (then BDM Technologies) had not yet created a truly integrated system, they were up to the task when approached by McLean County administrators.

Developing the system

The team started by defining the requirements of each department, reviewing the current flow of information, and setting the direction for the system's applications. Parker said the process helped the integration committee develop a better understanding of day-to-day operations in other departments.

Cristin Monti is a public information officer with the Authority.

"As soon as we started exchanging information about what it's like in our offices, we began to see how the big picture fit together," she said. "People became more sensitive to the needs of the other departments."

The development of a standard police incident crime report, jail management system, and records management system for the Sheriff's Department, with links to the county's local law enforcement agencies, laid the project's foundation. With an arrest, local police officers complete the crime report and send the information electronically to the Sheriff's Department. The data is then used to book inmates at the McLean County Adult Detention Facility.

TRW later created a warrant system, a case initiation module for the state's attorney, and a court case management system for the circuit clerk. A cash management, docketing, and criminal case calendaring system also will be developed for the Clerk's Office.

Eventually every application will be designed to accommodate each element of the county's criminal justice system. The system also allows the ability to restructure as laws change or as called for within each department.

The circuit clerk's information system is scheduled to connect this spring to the county's integrated system, which already is used by the Sheriff's Department, State's Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, and police agencies in Bloomington, Normal, Chenoa, LeRoy, and Danvers.

So far the system has cut jail booking time in half, which will allow the budgeted number of correctional officers to accommodate an increasing workload. It also provides judges with substantially more background information on cases before them than the old system.

"If I have to set bond today in a case involving a defendant who was arrested

and that helps me make a better judgment of what the proper bond amount should be and what conditions should be set."

The system will enter its fourth and final phase early next year. The \$5.1 million project has gained international attention; Zeunik has received inquiries from as far as Australia and South Africa.

Since initiating the McLean County project, TRW has installed integrated sys-

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tems on a smaller scale in Oklahoma, New York, and New Mexico. These projects were completed faster and less expensively due to the availability of the basic software applications that were created initially for McLean. Additional hardware and software upgrades in McLean County considerably increased costs associated with its integration.

Collaborative efforts

Commitment from key players fuels McLean's integration efforts. The project has required vigilant involvement, including regular discussion on long-range planning, group decision-making, flexibility, and cooperation.

Thompson, TRW project manager. "They realized what they were working toward and were committed to seeing the project through."

Committee members knew up front that the project's success would require tireless cooperative efforts, and setting pride aside. McLean County State's Attorney Charles Reynard said the team agreed to be flexible and open to the ideas of others. "We couldn't have done it without forking over all of the traditional jealousies about turf and agreeing we were going to invent a new way of conducting business," he said.

Testing the applications and training staff members to use the system has been the most time consuming part of the project, Zeunik said. Developers met with actual users and tailored software to fit their information and workflow needs. They also conducted joint application development sessions to gather requirements and create prototypes with the input of individuals who would be using the system every day.

The collaborative stamina of those involved in making McLean County's integration efforts a success is what observers find most surprising, Parker said.

"It is hard when you have four or five elected officials who are used to having their own way — we are kind of known for having strong opinions," she said. "But a project like this has to have give and take. Everybody that was sitting around that table in the beginning is still at the table."

The staying power of these visionaries has paid off. After years of collaboration McLean County reaps the benefits of its newly integrated system with faster, more efficient ways of administering criminal justice. "It's been a refreshing experience," Reynard said. ■

them than the old system.

"If I have to set bond today in a case involving a defendant who was arrested last night, there isn't much time to study that person's background," said Circuit Judge Charles Witte. "The new system lets me review the criminal record much faster

ing regular discussion on long-range planning, group decision-making, flexibility, and cooperation.

"The biggest reason McLean County has been so successful is that all of the departments have been involved since the very first phases of the project," said Todd